



ਚਗੂ ਬਾਕਾ

Chagu Bakha

One Story

ONE STORY

A GLIMPSE INSIDE
NEWARI CULTURE

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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About Me

My name is Barsha Maharjan. I am from a small ethnic community in Nepal called Newar. Newars are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, living in the cities of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. Newars only comprise about 5% of the population of Nepal, but despite their small numbers they are rich in culture, art, and architecture. They have their own language. Their strong spiritual beliefs are expressed in unique festivals that are centuries if not millennia old. Yet, our culture is endangered by many factors, and I am realizing through my own life story that this crucial part of my identity could be lost. My thesis project is part of my efforts to preserve my Newar culture, both for myself and other young Newars like me.

My thesis project is a short animation about an ancient Newar folk tale representing Newar culture, my childhood memories, and my influences.





Newari women and a girl in a traditional ceremony

Picture from the internet

History of Newars

in Kathmandu

Kathmandu was previously known as Nepal Mandala and the citizens spoke and wrote in Nepal Bhasa (Newari language). My ethnic language, Newari, is considered an endangered language by UNESCO. My initial research brought me to the conclusion that parents did not teach Newar language to their children because all the government offices used the national language of Nepal, Nepali, so there was no need to learn to speak or write in Newari. However, a brief conversation with Ellen Coon, an independent scholar who has conducted oral history research in Kathmandu with Newars for 30 years, alerted me that the actual history of Newars and their language has been more complex.

The name of the country, Nepal, originally referred not to the nation as we know it today, but only to the Kathmandu Valley of the Newars. People from outside who were traveling to the Kathmandu Valley used to say that they were “going to Nepal,” and the Newar language was called “Nepal bhasa” or the language of Nepal. In the late 18th century, the Gorkha kings, from an area west of the Kathmandu Valley, invaded and conquered the Newar cities and towns of the Kathmandu Valley. They made Kathmandu the new capital of their expanded territory. Gradually the expanded Gorkha kingdom began to be referred to by the name of its capital, “Nepal.” The language of the conquerors, which had been called Gorkhali or Parbatiya, became known as Nepali. Nepal bhasa, or the language of the Newars, became more commonly referred to as Newari.

The Gorkha state oppressed Newars in many different ways, and especially suppressed the Newar language. A blog post details some of the history of this suppression and some Newar efforts to defend their language:

Newars have made struggle for linguistic rights in the face of opposition from the government since the invasion of Gorkha in Nepal Mandala. Newars kept on struggling for their linguistic rights. In 1940, the government mounted a crackdown against democracy activists and writers. Several authors were arrested and hanged. During those times, people had to go to Telecom Office and use a telephone. If someone spoke in Nepal Bhasa, the phone would be cut off by the authority. If anyone wrote in Nepal Bhasa, they would be jailed. No people in group of three or four were allowed to sit and talk in public spaces. Many of writers went to Banaras or Kolkatta in

India and printed books. These books were very secretly brought into Nepal, like two three books hidden inside a big basket of fruits. If found, the people were punished and the books were destroyed...- From 1952 to 1991, the percentage of the valley population speaking Nepal Bhasa dropped from 74.95% to 43.93%, while the language has been listed as being “definitely endangered” by UNESCO.¹

Even though I am a Newar, I did not have knowledge about my history and how my ancestors fought for the Newari language. While I was in Nepal, I may have chosen to be ignorant about my culture and its history but since coming to New York and being surrounded by a diverse group of people from all around the world, I began to see Newars, Newari and our culture in a different light. In this place, surrounded with advanced technology, fast paced development and diversity, I felt totally lost. In a place where I could not relate to anything, the only thing that I could find solace in was my own culture, and though I took it for granted when I was in Nepal, those memories were the things that kept me sane and pulled me back to where I come from.

Newars Now

Many Newars still speak Newari in their households, but the children being exposed to Nepali most of the time made it hard for the parents to interact with their kids in Newari. I believe this was the case for my parents as well. They taught me Newari when I was little but after I joined school, my use of Newari spoken language lessened and now I can understand Newari but can't speak clearly. Despite that, my parents would communicate in Newari to me and I would reply back in Nepali. That's how its been for me for the past 27 years and only now since knowing the history, I realize the importance of speaking my ethnic language.

¹ KAPALI, R. AND KAPALI, V.

The black day of 1st Baisakh : Ban in Nepal Bhasa - Rukuchee Blog

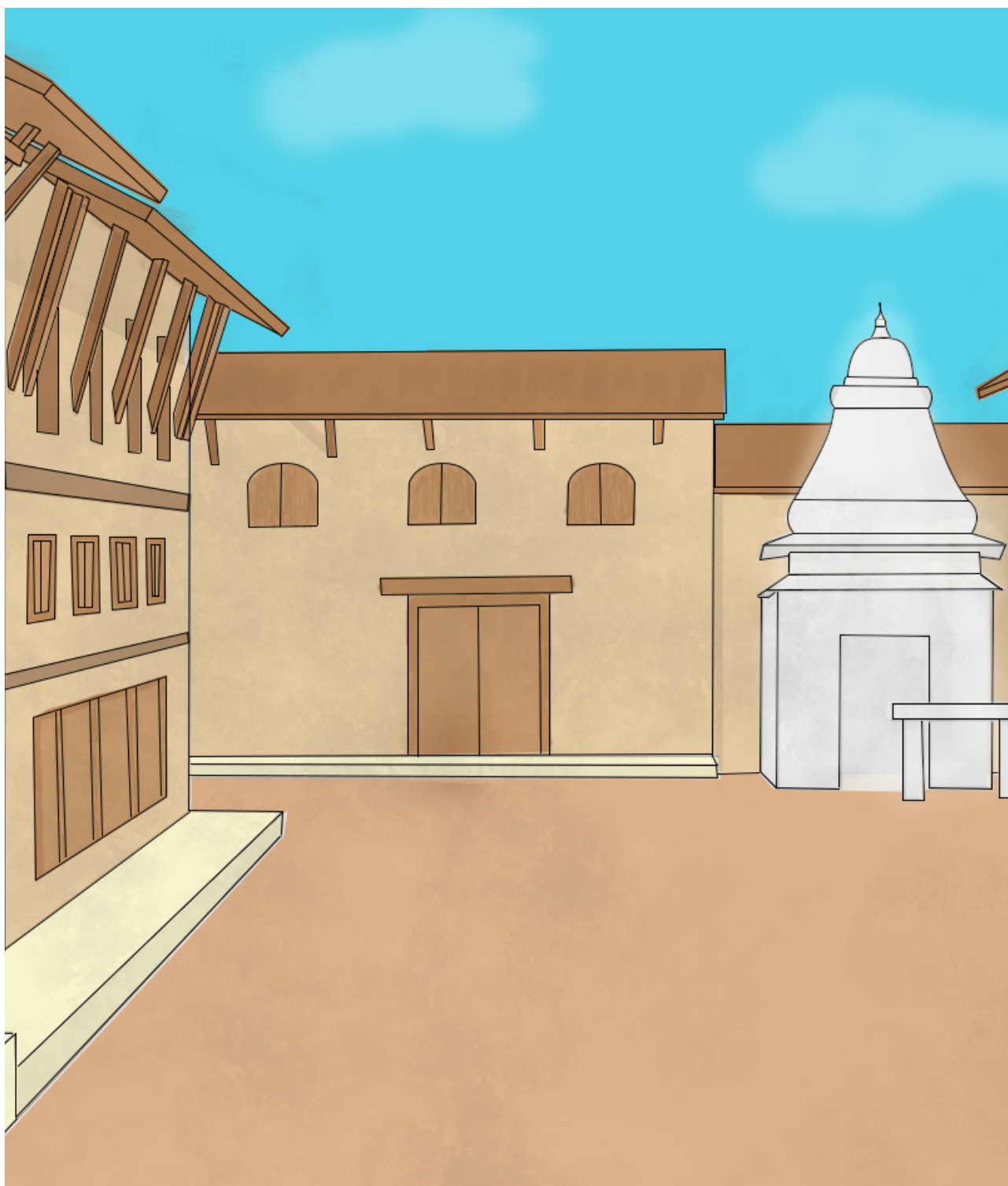


Me (left) and my friend Monika with our fathers at coming of age ritual called ihi

My Childhood

I grew up in a rich Newar culture, surrounded by our distinct festivals, rituals, food, music and architecture. There are 6 members in my family, my grandmother, father, mother, me and my two sisters. I am the eldest among my siblings. My parents followed all the rituals and tradition from my ancestors so I have experienced and followed most of them. As the young ones in the family, we follow these traditions even though we don't understand the historical context or meaning behind them.

Most old Newari houses are made of mud, bricks and wood. We don't have heat in the houses and the mud house is supposed to be warm during the winter and cool during the summer, but since more and more cement buildings were built nearby, they would block the sunlight and then our house would remain extremely cold during the winter. So to escape the cold, my mother would light some wood in a Makal (Clay pot) and we, my grandmother, sisters and cousins would sit around fire pot enjoying its warmth. In winter season, we had power outages, it would be pitch black outside and the insides of the house would be dimly lit with a candle or oil lamp. This environment was perfect for story telling so my grandmother would tell us stories about deities, khyas (demons) and ghosts that she encountered when she was young. As a 7 year old girl, I grew fascinated with the stories and carefully listened to every bit of her words and imagined the visuals in my head. Of course, she told us the stories in Newari and we would comprehend it. She told us the stories as though she experienced them for real which made me believe that khyas and witches indeed existed and roamed around humans during her time. So, my fascination with stories and storytelling began at an early



The Need to Tell Stories

I would tell the stories that my grandmother told me to my class at school and my friends would hover around me to listen. I love telling stories. However, knowing about these ancient folk tales was only possible because of my grandmother, if she she was not around, I would have never known them. Currently, this is what worries me the most because the older generations are passing away and the grandkids have no one to tell these stories to them. Besides, with the growing technology, they would prefer to be around televisions and internet much more than their grandparents. The stories that my grandmother told me were so beautiful so after being accepted to Parsons School of Design, I started looking into ways by which I could combine history and technology together so that I could reach the younger generation of Newars.

According to Ellen Coon, a Columbia University-trained oral historian,

“The Newars have a unique religious culture, a tantric Buddhism and Hinduism deeply rooted in the sacred landscapes of Kathmandu Valley. Scholars have compared Newar culture to ancient Greece and Rome in its power and complexity. But that culture is eroding and in danger of being lost. Even the Newar language is now endangered. I have noticed that the younger Newars are becoming disconnected from the stories that pass on their religious, cultural and social identity. Some younger Newar people cannot even understand their grandparents. Those are the stories that tell you who you are. A story is a living thing, though, and for a story to stay alive, it has to be retold in new ways. There has to be a way to retell these stories that will reach Newar children and Newar people in diaspora, keeping something very important and beautiful alive.”²

I begin with one story. I will tell one story at a time.

² Ellen Coon, personal communication



Scenes from Spirited Away (2001) and Princess Mononoke (1997) by Hayao Miyazaki
Ghibli Movie

My father used to own a CD shop when I was little, so I grew up watching all different genres of movies. I would watch American, French, Japanese and Korean movies. I would carefully analyze the storytelling methods of each one of them. The movies that stuck with me the most are the Ghibli Collections³. My favourite movies from Ghibli are Hayao Miyazaki's Howl's Moving Castle, Spirited Away and Kiki's Delivery Service. I would watch these movies over and over again and later I came to realize the art of ambivalence in most of his creations. Miyazaki does not explain what is happening in a particular scene but lets the audience interpret it in their own way⁴. Some of his creations are related to Japanese culture which he does not explain in detail but still communicates a feeling of nostalgia to the audience.

He often includes nature, forest gods, spirits, witches and ancient creatures in his films which are easily ignored in the high speed developing environment nowadays. We in Newari culture believe that souls and spirits exist in every animate and inanimate object. The gods and spirits he shows are very much similar to Newari culture, even though our cultures are different, our concepts are similar.

My thesis project, an animated movie, is heavily inspired by Miyazaki. I have tried to show our belief of souls in objects, what my nostalgic feeling of my childhood was like, the lifestyle of the Newar locals and our tradition. Explaining in detail about each of those elements are beyond the scope of the animation so I am writing to explain about what happens in the animation and why it is done.

³ Ghibli Collection, Japanese animated movies directed by Hayao Miyazaki

⁴ Spirited Away (2001) by Hayao Miyazaki

Spirits and Souls

We believe that there are souls and spirits residing in every object. In Newari culture, there is a day in Mohni (one of the biggest festivals, goes on for 15 days) that is dedicated to worshiping the equipment we use for work. The ones that I have seen being worshiped at home are farm tools, motorbikes, cars, sewing machines, water vessels, brooms etc. We clean them and we don't use them for that day. It seemed to me as though we were thanking them.



Newar worshipping motorbike on the ninth day of Mohni
(Picture from Internet)



Worshipping machine on the ninth day of Mohni
(Picture from Internet)



Worshipping Self Ritual Process
(Picture from KathmanduPost)

During Newari New Year in Sunti, a few days after Mohni, we perform an annual ritual ceremony called Mha puja (worshipping our body) done to purify and empower the body. We take our body as a separate entity than our soul. So, during this day we perform a ritual to pray that our body remains healthy for the time until next year. The belief of spirituality is really strong amongst Newar community.



Newari Girls playing traditional instruments
(Picture from KathmanduPost)

Musical Instruments

There are lots of musical instruments in Newari culture. The major ones are percussion and wind instruments, including Dhime, Khi, Bhusya, Basuri and others. These instruments are taught to Newari children after their school in the joint community space where all of these instruments are stored. There is particular music for every season of the year and there are beats that are not supposed to be played at any time. The children are taught various beats and music for months, for free, managed by the Guruba (music teacher). So, the class starts for 2-3 hours every day for months and after the end of the class, a huge feast is made to mark the completion of the course and to welcome the children as musicians in the neighbourhood. The children can now go to festivals playing these instruments representing their neighbourhood. Before heading out, they gather and wait until everybody arrives accompanied by Guruba. During these festivals, you can see children and youth wearing colored shirts and playing instruments representing their respective neighbourhood. For me these were really memorable moments.

In the animation, the protagonist wakes up when the group gathers outside of her house in the morning and she goes along with them to the temple of goddess Harari Ma at Swyambhu.



When we are sick

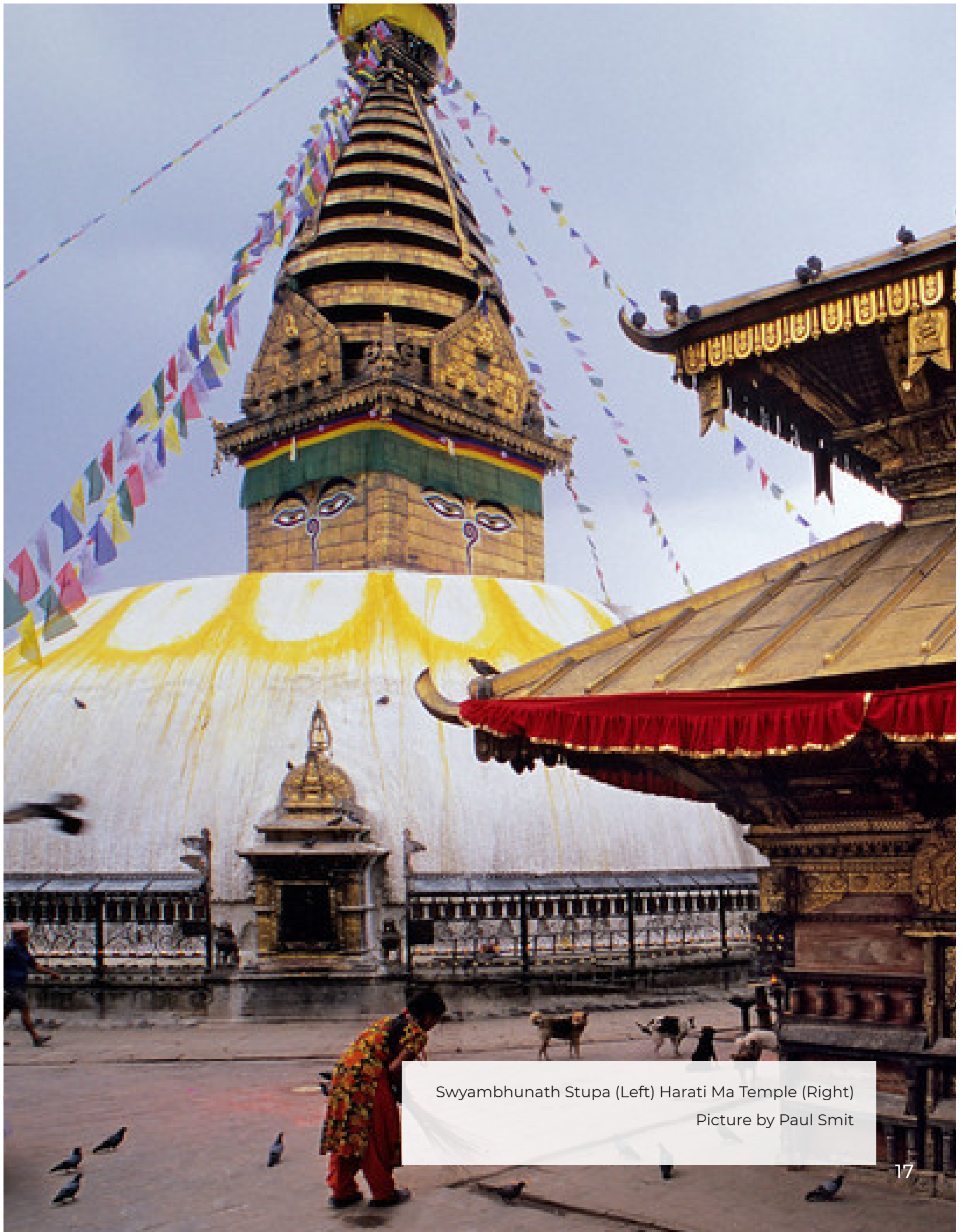
In Newar culture, when we are sick, we first do Jaki Holyu (rice scattering). Rice grains hold a great significance in our culture. It is an integral element in every prayer and ritual. When I was sick, my mom would come to me with a fist full of rice in her right hand. Tap three times on my head and pour a little bit out on her other hand with each tap. Tapping the rice on the head, could signify as a prayer to the gods on their behalf to take away the pain or it could also mean that if the sickness is caused by someone's Mikha Wonue (Bad eye, people wishing misfortune), the tapping meant transferring the misfortune in the rice. My mother would then go to the roof and scatter the rice in the air little at a time. The roof of my house is made of tin so I could hear the trickling sound of the rice being scattered.

If I was really sick and the Jaki Holyu did not work, my mother would put a kisli (Rice Prayer) for me. Kislis are a form of prayer to powerful gods. So, the one who is praying already has a god in their mind when they are arranging it. One kisli is only meant for one god. In Kisli, rice is poured, after tapping three times on the head, in a small clay bowl with a betel nut (whole, not cut) on the top of rice along with some 1 or 2 rupee coins. The clay bowl would then be put on higher space, often on the top of shelves and dressers where nobody can touch it. Later, the kisli is taken to the designated god as a prayer after few days.

Another common form of prayer when one is sick is the prayer to the holy serpent god. We believe that there is a holy serpent in each house so when we disrupt it by spreading impurity, it often catches a member of the house and makes them sick. So my grandmother or mother would make a cotton thread and put them on the area where the water passes, could be a sink or near the tap. The thread is rounded and connected. The connected parts are pinched with orange tika (colored powder).

Sometimes, after following these rituals, the sickness would go away. We go to the doctors and take medicines as well but we also continue with these rituals. It might be because these rituals gives us a peace of mind which is important during the healing process and it also gives us a feeling of being protected and that the gods would take care of our illness.

In my animation, Chagu Bakha, a kisli is put near the protagonist because her fever is not going down so her mother decides to pray to the powerful goddess of children, Harati Ma, by putting a kisli in her name. When I mention “putting the name”, it doesn't mean writing the name. It means remembering the person in the process of making kisli.



Swyambhunath Stupa (Left) Harati Ma Temple (Right)

Picture by Paul Smit

Harati Ma

The temple of Harati Ma (Harati Mother) is at the top of the hill besides the Swyambhu stupa, or dome. In Newari culture, we call goddesses “mother” and add the word Ma (Mother) after their name. Swyambhunath stupa is a Buddhist monument and Harati Ma’s temple is in the form of a Hindu shrine. It is uncommon for two monuments of different religions to be on the same space. This is where the folk tale starts.

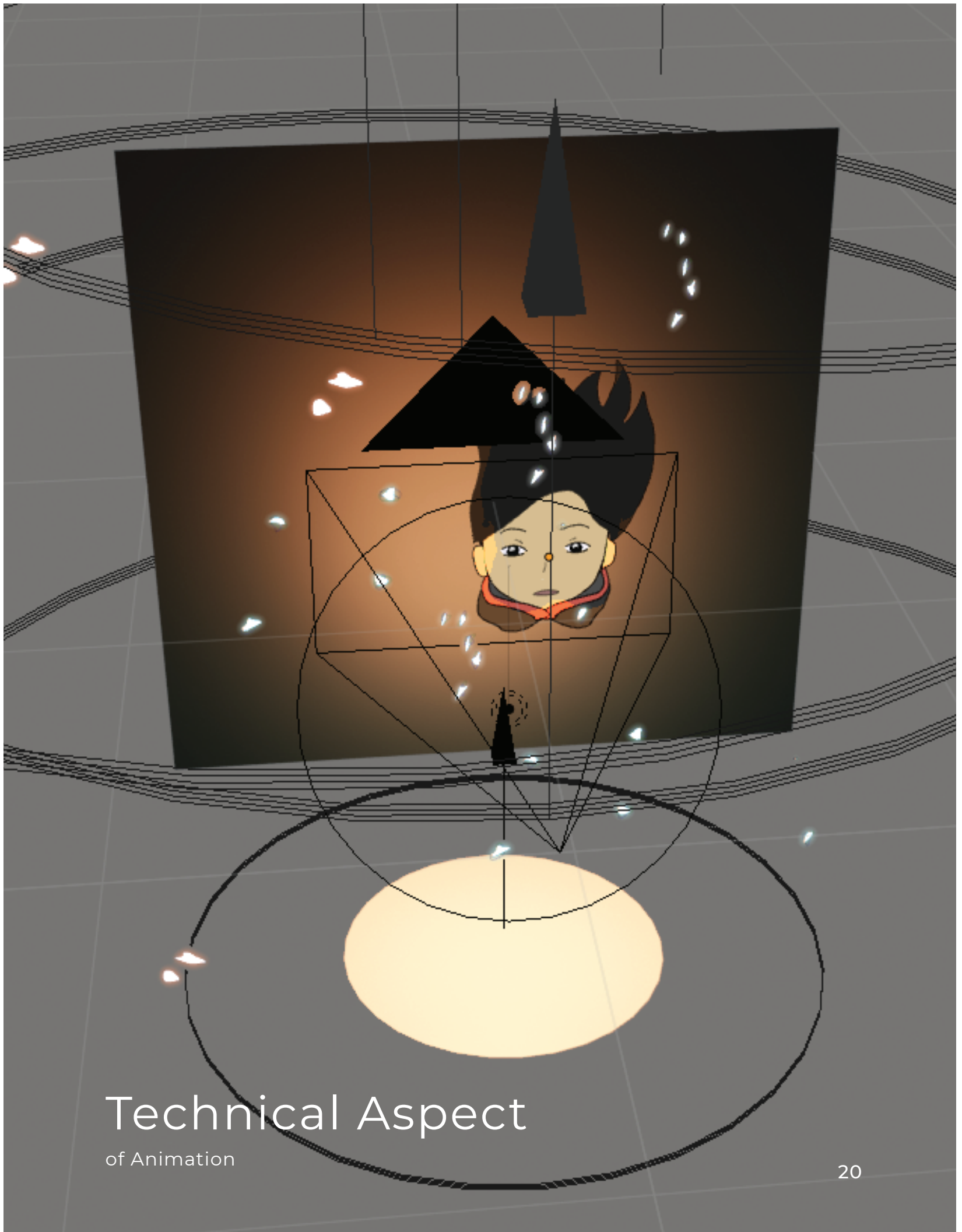
In ancient times, the deities and gods would roam around Kathmandu Valley in various forms. Sometimes, they would take the form of a beautiful lady to lure other people, sometimes of a little baby, other times of animals and birds, even at times of inanimate objects. This story revolves around a demon so fierce that nobody, even the gods wouldn’t dare cross her path. She was feared amongst the residents of the Valley because her hunger was so big that she would eat their children. She would go to the Valley and hunt down the kids to eat them. The parents of the Valley were terrorized so they hid their children but the demon would somehow lure them outside and take them away. The parents would be devastated to find their kids missing.

With each passing day, the number of children began to lessen. The parents went and pleaded to different gods to protect them but no god would dare go against the demon. To no avail, they went to Buddha. They wept and told him that they wanted to protect their children from the demon. Calmly, Buddha assured that he would help them.

After that day, the demon as usual went to the valley to hunt. Now, the demon had hundreds of her own children. Buddha took this opportunity and hid 8 of her favourite children inside an underground vault.

Later when the demon returned, she couldn't find her favourite children. She searched and searched but to no avail. Heartbroken and devastated, she went to Buddha and accused him of taking away her children. Buddha told her that her children are inside the underground vault. She tried but could not open it no matter how hard she tried. She could hear them crying from the inside but her monstrous strength was of no use. She cried and begged him to release them. At last, Buddha told her, "If you feel this much pain when your children go missing for a few hours, imagine the pain of the parents of the children you ate." She realized her wrongdoings and apologized. Buddha then made a pact with her saying he would release her kids if from then on and forward she protects the children of the Valley. She agreed and from then till now, it is believed that she protects the children of the Valley and the parents take their children to her temple when they are sick. The parents would also put Kisli in the name of the children, to bring them to her later. We call her Harati Ma. The Deity, fiercest of them all, is the mother who protects the children of the Valley from evil and sickness.

In the animation, I intended to show the moment of transformation, when the goddess was a demon but then with Buddha's wisdom turns into an enlightened being. My child protagonist falls into the Swyambhu dome. Nobody knows what is inside the dome. There have been studies through x-rays which show that ancient artifacts are inside the dome but nobody knows for sure. However, I imagine a glowing pond to be inside of the stupa, with Buddha's statue in its deeper end. When the protagonist falls into the pond she is softly pushed to the surface with a white pigeon symbolizing Buddha. The Buddha then shines his light on the demon, turning her into a glowing enlightened being sparkling in the dark cave. The protagonist is blessed with her light. When she wakes up from her dreams, her fever has gone away showing the healing power of Harati Ma.



Technical Aspect

of Animation

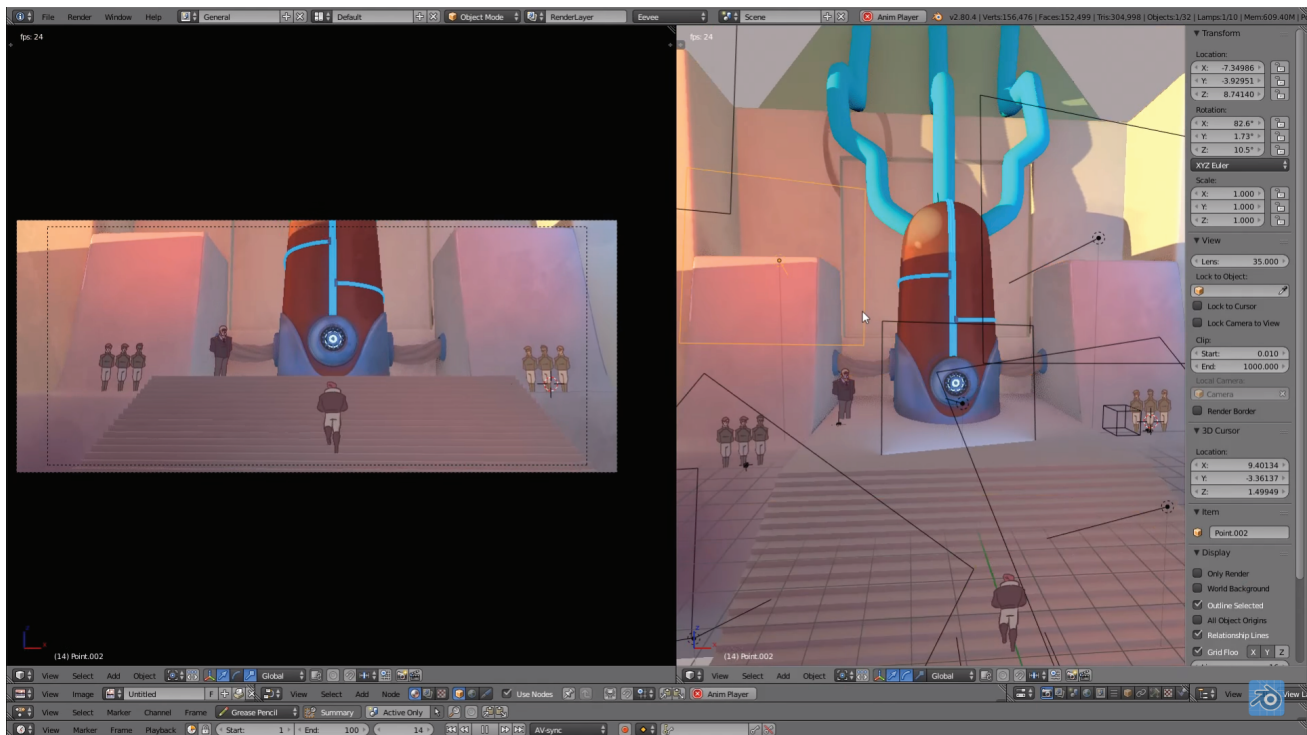
I used blender 2.8 beta version for animation. Blender is a 3D software which has recently gained attention, in 2019, among 2D artists through its ability to make hand-drawn animation in 3D space. I used blender 2.80 which is still in beta version at the date I used it because you can manipulate 2D drawings just like 3D objects which means you can scale, rotate, sculpt the drawings. The other reason I used blender is that it is free software.

I don't have any drawing experience and I have not used a drawing tablet before. So, it was really ambitious of me to dive into a hand-drawn 2D animation world. I have to admit that it was a daring feat to learn drawing and animating frame by frame in such a little time for the thesis project.

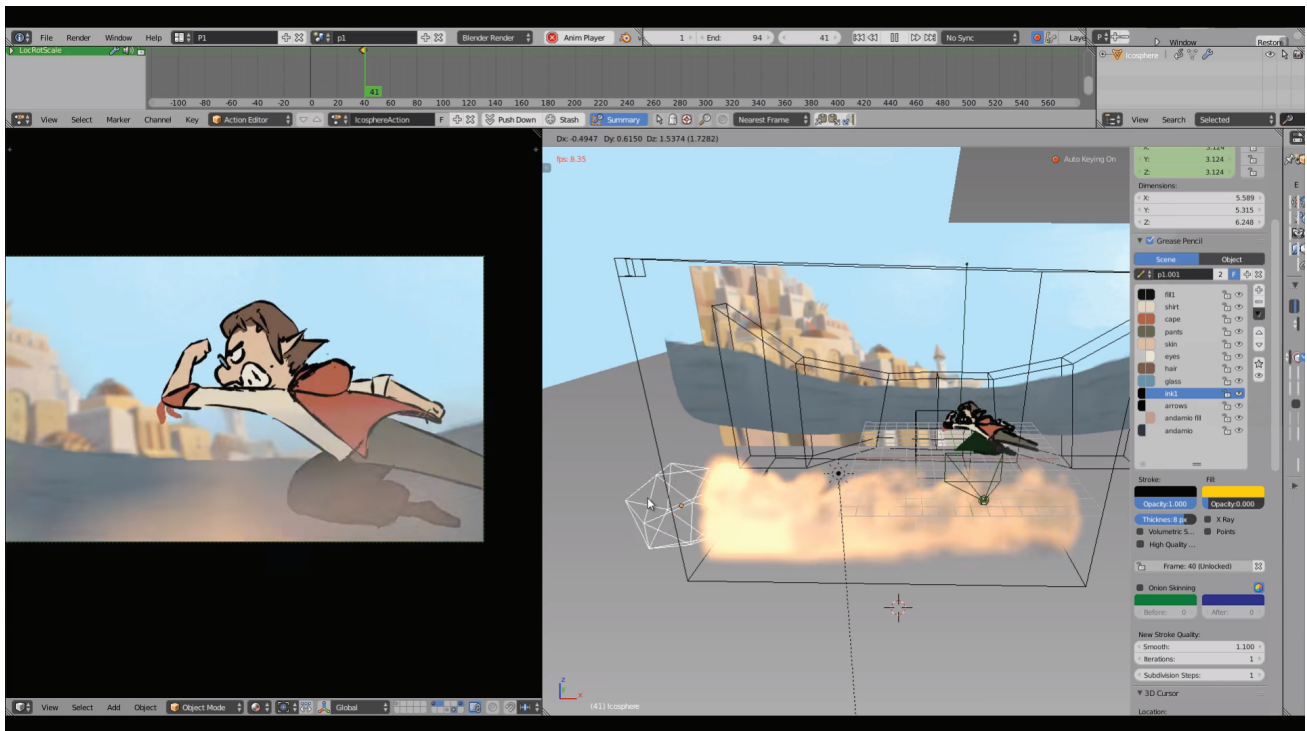
Before using Blender 2.8, I tried 4 different softwares: Adobe Animate, TV Paint, Toon Boom and Opentoonz. I found Adobe Animate hard to get used to after using it for a few days because I felt like it is not beginner friendly and the User Interface was confusing to use as well. TV Paint was costly even at student discounted price. Toon Boom and Opentoonz didn't work for me as well. I used all of these software for 2-3 days to see which fits best for my needs. I needed a software which had a quick turnover for beginners and which would be fun to use.

As I was searching for 2D animation software, I came across an animation called "Hero". It was a normal 2D animation movie but what caught my attention was the part of the ending credits where they displayed the process of how they made the animation and it blew my mind when I learned it was made in Blender because I had only known Blender as a 3D software. I looked into other 2D animation made with Blender called "Kairos" which demonstrated smooth camera movements in the 3D environment. My inspiration to learn Blender grew from these two animated shorts.

The following two images are from Hero and Kairos. The scenes displayed side by side are from the same scene but with different perspective. One first one on the left is from Camera Perspective and the other one on the right is User Perspective. You can dolly in/out, zoom in/out in your drawings in multiple perspective. There are multiple ways to fully explore camera capabilities.



Hero
HERO – Blender Grease Pencil Showcase, 2018



Kairos
Blender Grease Pencil by Daniel M Lara Pepeland, 2016

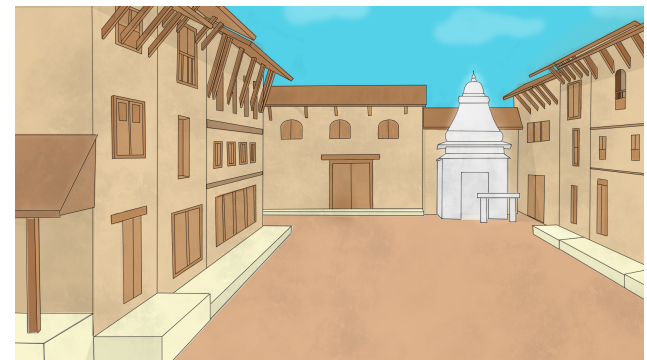
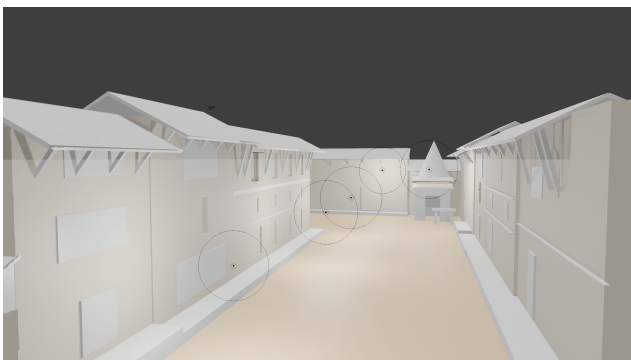
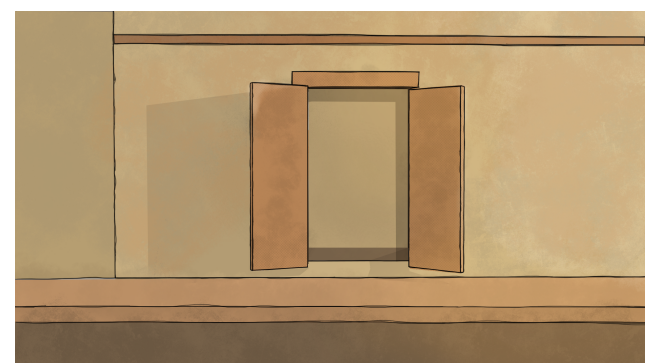
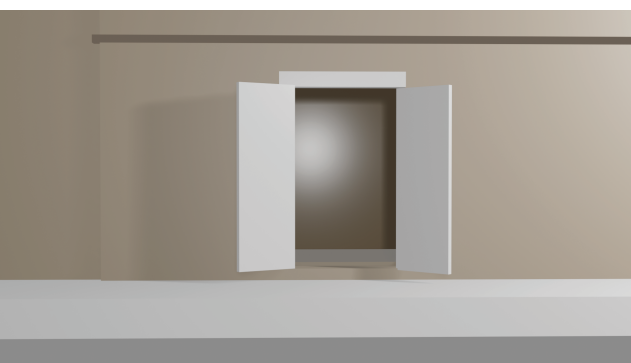
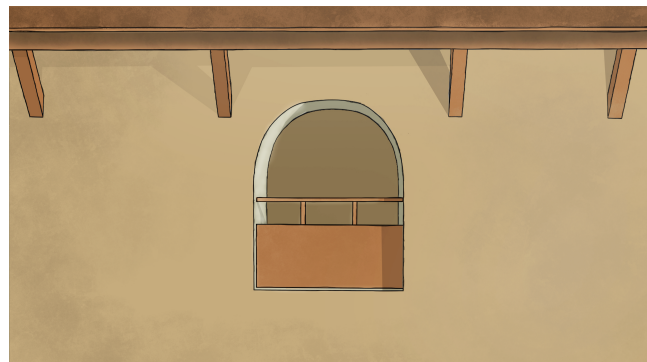
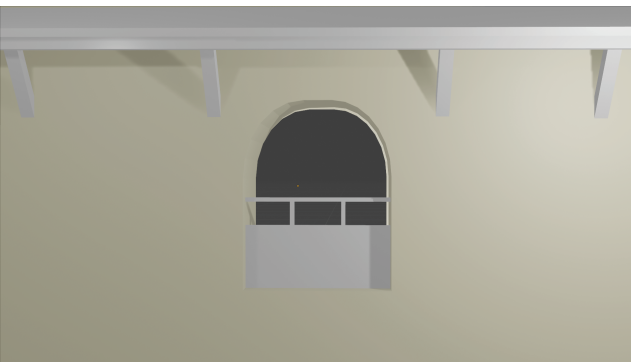
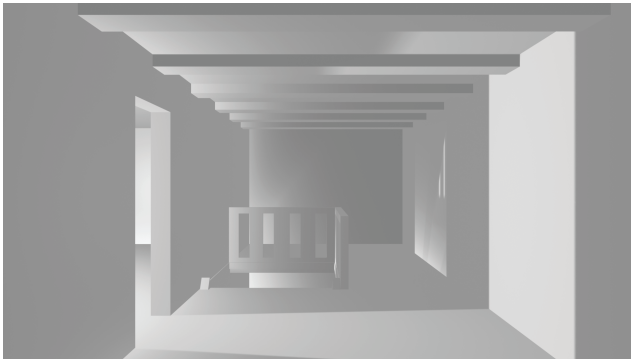
The Process

Blender 2.8 introduces a new feature called grease pencil which allows you to draw in a 3D spaces and the strokes are treated as a 3D objects. You can manipulate the lines by editing and sculpting after you drew them just like any other 3D object. This was the main reason I was attracted to using blender 2.8 for my project because I wanted the feasibility of manipulating the lines without having to draw them again and again.

My project is a frame by frame animation so every minute movement has to be drawn in each frame. The background changes with the movement of perspective on each scene so they need to be redrawn again as well. I found blender 2.8 really helpful with this aspect because you can navigate the camera to any desired perspective to get a new scene of the same space without having to redraw them.

I build the background in 3D to compensate for my inability to draw perspective lines. However, even if blender is capable of converting 3D into 2D look alike drawings, I did not have this skillset at the time so what I did is, once I have the perspective of the scene. I took a screenshot and move them in photoshop to do the texturing. It could also be done in blender but you need texturing skills and a powerful computer and also the program constantly crashes since the file is huge. So, I opted to turn to photoshop for texturing.

I tried to replicate my neighborhood in Kathmandu in the design and architecture of the houses. They are drawn based on my memory of what my hometown used to look like when I was little.

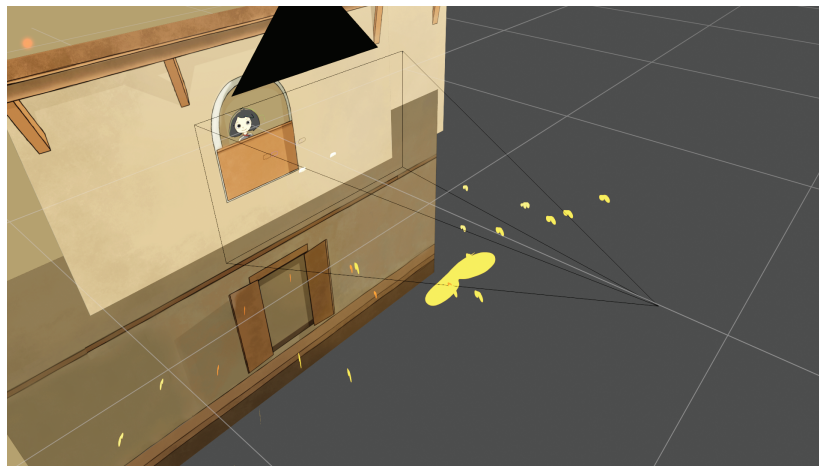


Adding Characters and Animation

After the background scene is textured in Photoshop, it is imported in Blender 2.8. I drew the characters in blender with grease pencil. The camera can pan in and out of the 2d objects so the environment can be manipulated to look like they have depth and distance. Both of the images below are from the same scene.



Camera Perspective



User Perspective

The other feature that I found really interesting is Particles Effect:

Greasepencil Particles: Allows to draw custom particles, multiply them and add force fields like wind. An example of this would be fluttering butterflies. You can draw a butterfly flutter in 4 frames, then you can use particle effect to multiply that butterfly and apply wind effect to move them in certain direction. So, you will have a group of butterflies flying in 2D animation in no time.

Difficulties

Although Blender 2.8 is a revolutionary 2D animation software, I found it really difficult to learn its workflow. Since, its a relatively new, there are not many tutorials to follow as well. So it took a long time to get to know the workflow, the learning curve was really steep. I spent 3 hours searching on the internet about how to import an image in blender 2.8.

However, the blender community in “blender.chat website” was really helpful in answering any of the queries to their best. I also had tons of technical help from my colleague, Varapong Techapanichgul (Neil).

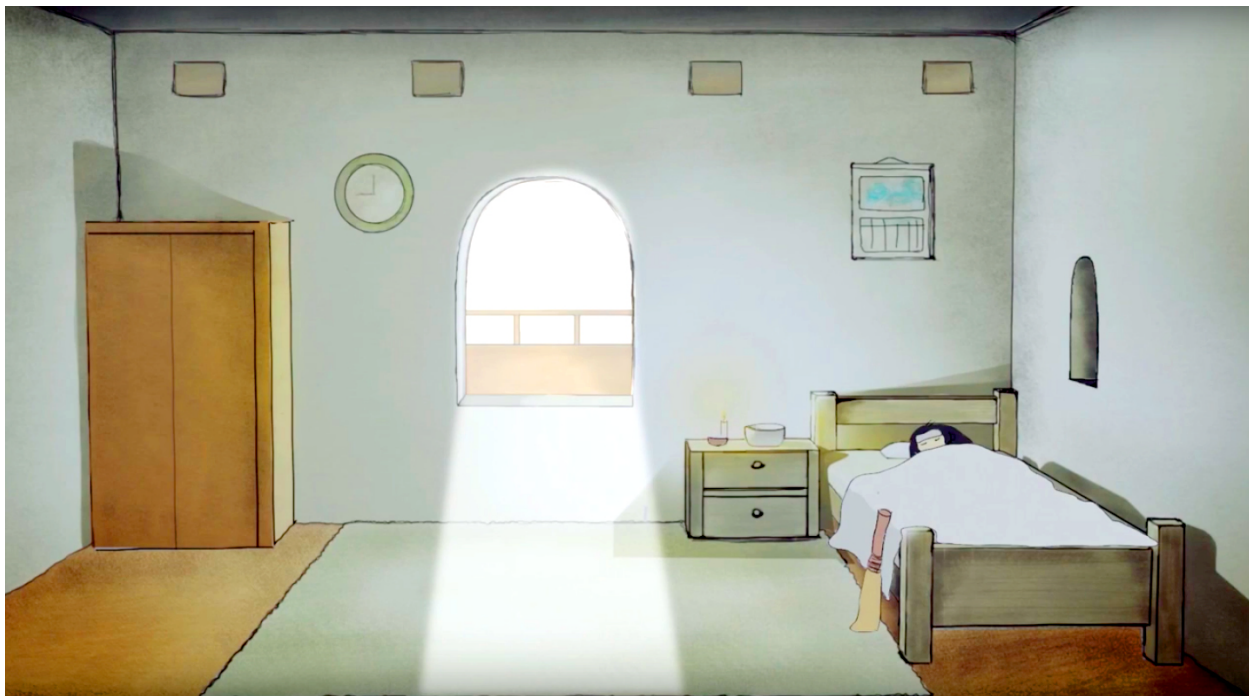
Result

I believe, the days spent in learning the software was worth it because once you get used to the workflow and know where to look for menus, it becomes really easy to bring your imagination to life. For me, it was a constant process of revising the work done at the beginning with the tools I learned later in the process. I found easier and faster ways to work around an issue which took me weeks to figure out when I started blender 2.8.

I was able to make a short animation despite the technical difficulties and overall it was a fun learning process.

One Story

a visual narrative



The little newari girl is sick , She spends most of her time in the bed.



Often when she is sleeping alone, her mother would put a broom next to her so that the wandering gods wouldn't take her away thinking she was sleeping alone.



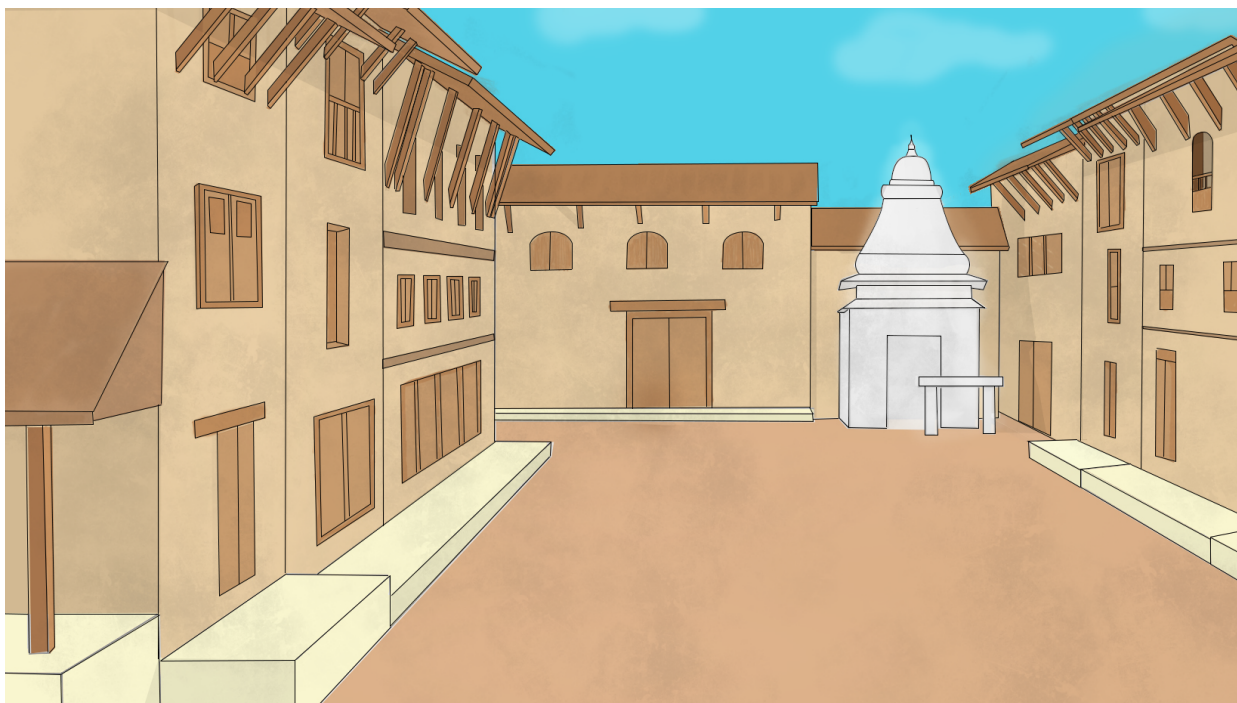
She also put a Kisli (rice prayer) next to her to pray to the god of children, Harati Ma, for her quick recovery.



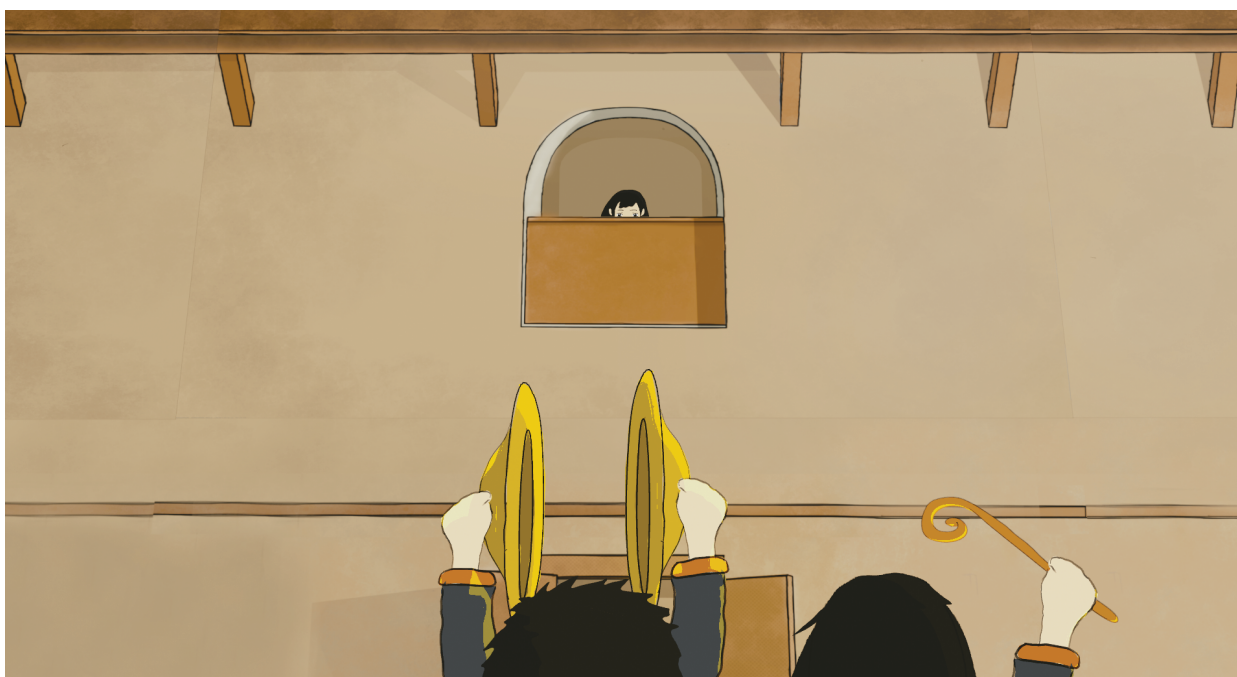
It was just like any other night she would sleep barely able to open her eyes because of the pounding on her head.

She dreamed.

The glowing spirits from the Kisli and the broom flew and got closer to her head as though blessing her and went right outside the window.



She wakes up to the sound of morning bells and the sound of Bhushya* from outside.



Excited she runs to the window and looks down.
She sees a group of children playing musical instruments.

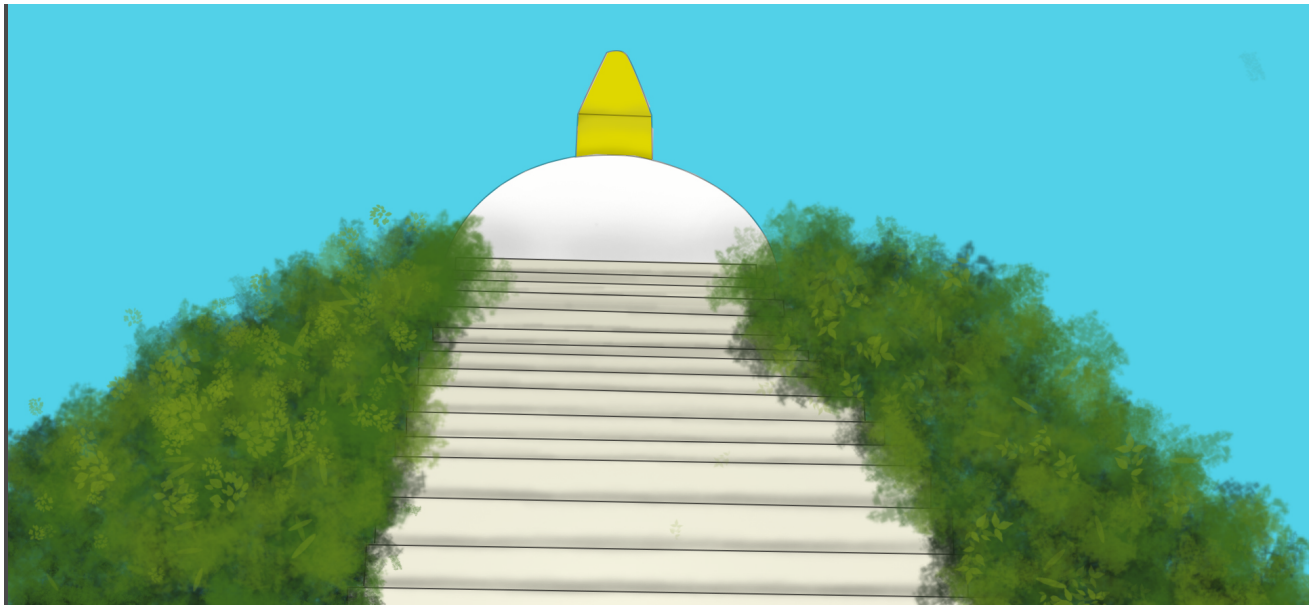
*Bhushya = Traditional Newari musical Instrument that looks like cymbals



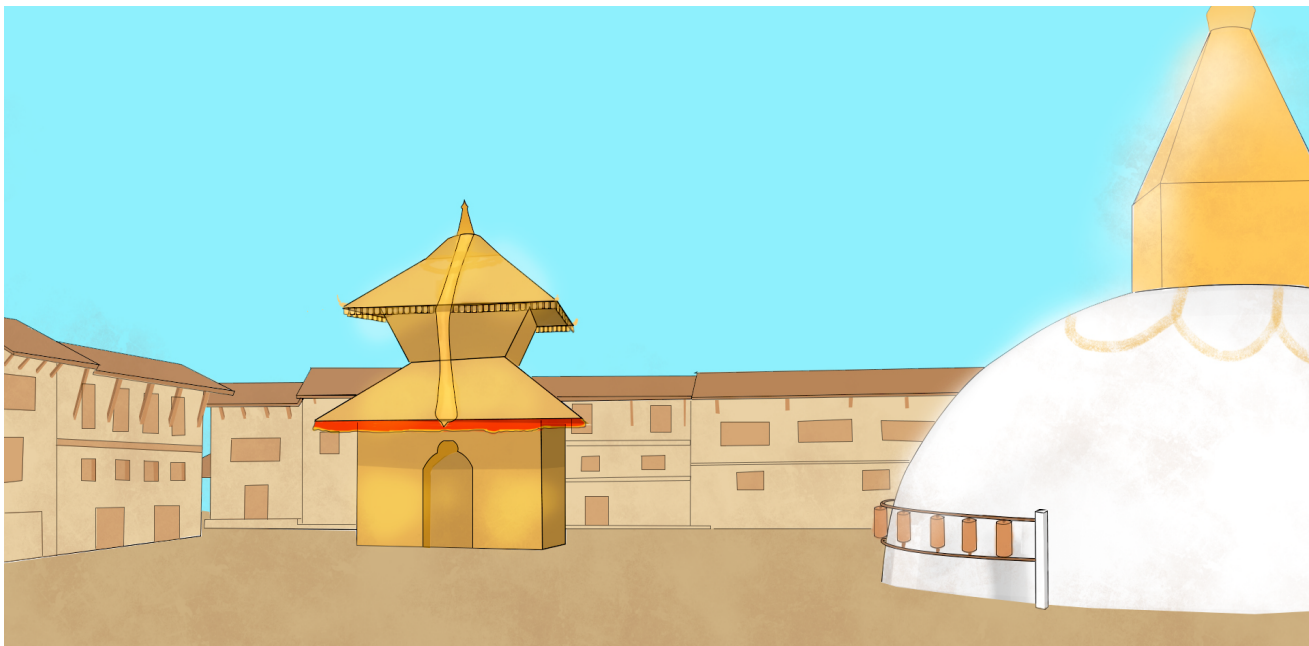
She runs down and finds her father ready to go with the group.

He asks her if she wanted to come along. They hold hands and go along with the group.

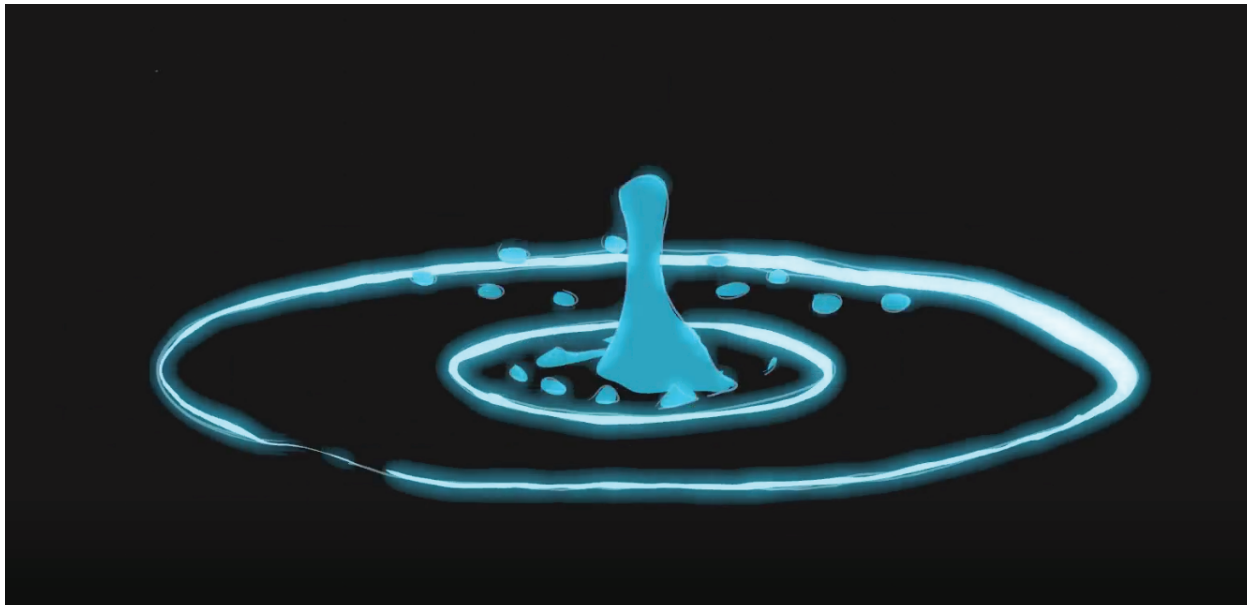
There are certain months in Newar culture where every morning we gather up, play musical instruments and head over to Swyambhunath Stupa. The group are usually children accompanied by the music teacher, Guruba.



They finally reach the Swyambhunath stupa. Her father puts her up on his shoulders because the temple is at the top of the hill with several steps.

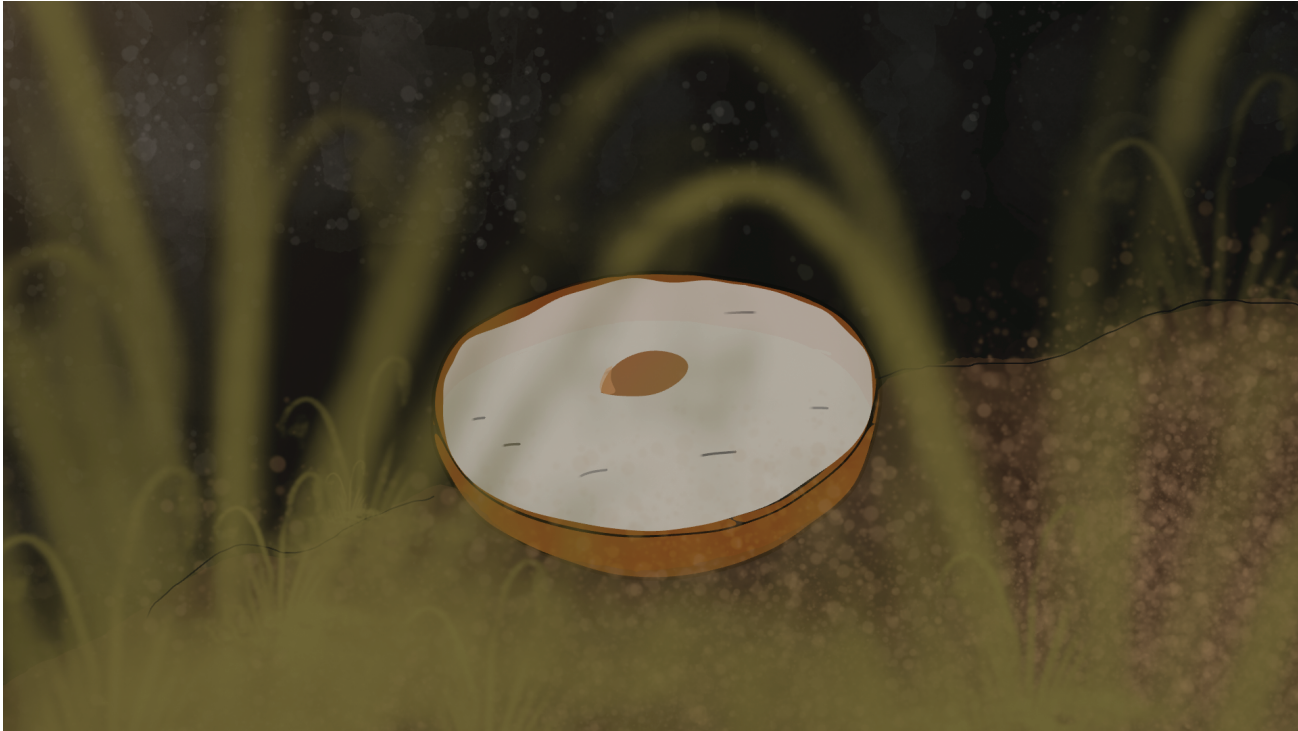


She is amazed by the view of the surrounding of Swyambhu.
Excitedly she runs around but all of a sudden she stumbles upon a rock and falls into the stupa.



She finds herself in a cave-like dark place. She hears some water droplets and looks around. To her surprise, there is a glowing pond right at the centre.

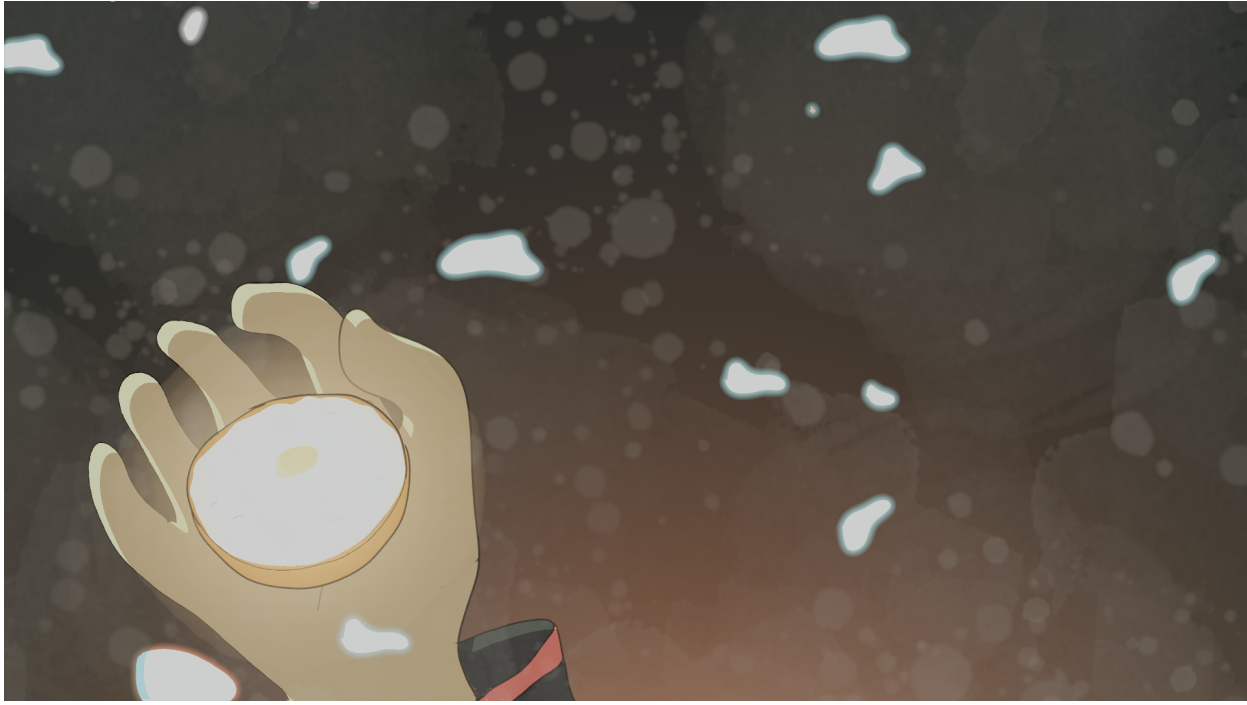
She goes closer to the pond. It was glowing and the water was crystal clear.



But to her surprise, she finds a Kisli (rice prayer) in the dark and picks it up but she hears a distant roar. She is scared and takes a step back but the demon hears her and runs towards her.

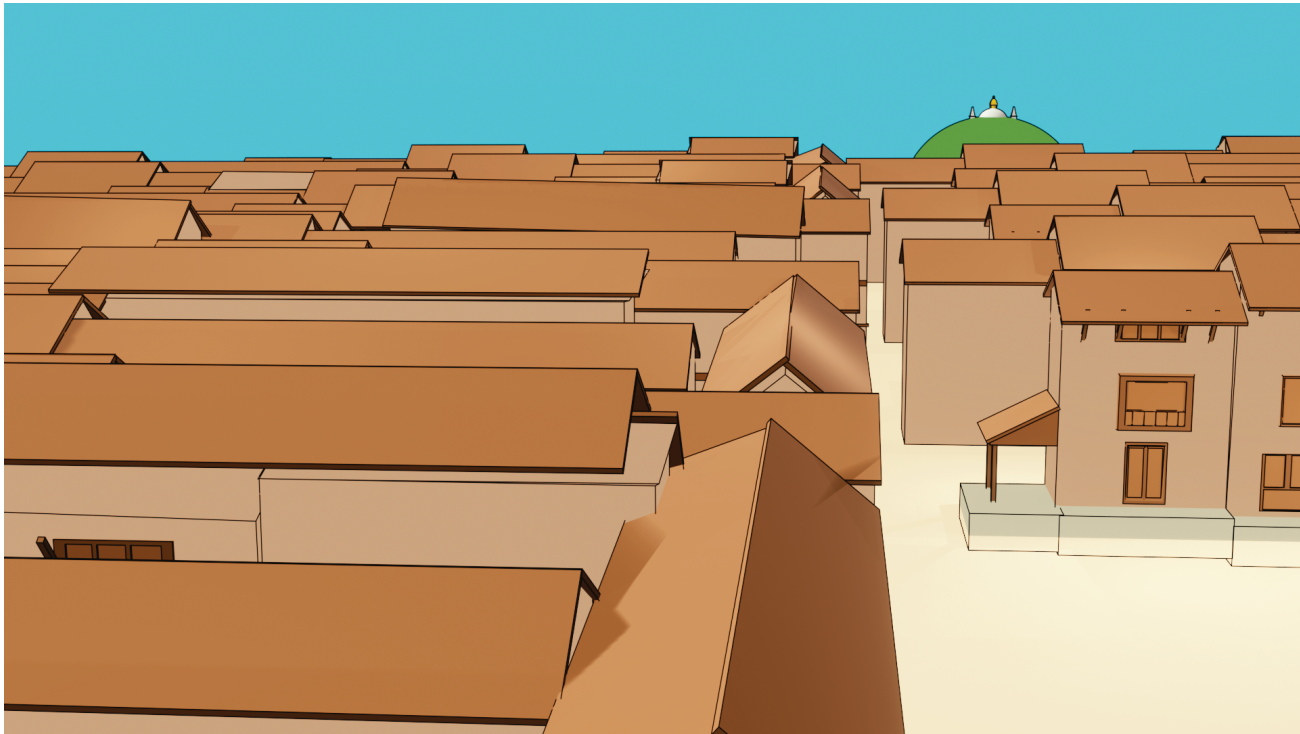


She falls into the pond. She can't swim. She falls into its depths.



A faint light glows from the Kisli. She sees a glowing figure, Harati Ma, walking towards her and opens her palms as though asking for the Kisli she is holding.

She hands it over to her and the glowing figure puts her hand on her head blessing her.



As soon as the figure blesses her, she flies in the sky and towards her home.

She waked up from her dreams and sees her mother changing the wet cloth on her head. She smiles because she knows she is being protected by Harati Ma and her mother a person who is greater than any Gods.

In Newari culture, dreams are taken seriously as a form of revelation.

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